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Bonita Unified Culinary Team Breaks New Ground at National ProStart Invitational

SAN DIMAS/LA VERNE – Bonita High School’s ProStart culinary team wrapped up their most successful year in spectacular fashion, earning a 10th-place finish in their first-ever appearance as Team California during the National ProStart Invitational, held this spring at the Marriott Baltimore Waterfront Hotel.

The five-student team, led by captain Charli Padilla, team manager Laura Mangiafreno, and team members Nicolas Caballero, Cameron Turoci and Michael Vera, wowed the judges with a three-course gourmet meal consisting of raviolo doppio, pan-seared elk tenderloin and a slice of entremet layer cake, propelling the team to a top-10 finish, the highest placement for a California team in many years.

“We are ecstatic over the results. This is a huge step forward for the Bonita Unified culinary arts program,” Bonita High ProStart teacher Laurie Brandler said. “We’re setting a high bar for our schools and also for the entire state of California. It was an incredible experience and I couldn’t be prouder of our kids.”

This is the second year in a row that the husband-and-wife team of Nick and Laurie Brandler, who teach at San Dimas and Bonita high schools, respectively, have sent a team to nationals. Last year, San Dimas High represented California in the Management Cup, with Laurie joining as a mentor, to help prepare the team for their presentations. San Dimas went on to earn a third-place finish in the 50-state field.

This year, it was Nick’s turn to offer his help to the Bonita culinary team. Taking notes as he watched the team do a run-through in their test kitchen, Nick made some recommendations that provided the team with nearly 20 extra minutes of prep time, which allowed the team to make changes to their menu, including swapping out store-bought ricotta with homemade ricotta and using fried basil as a garnish.

The Bonita team arrived in Baltimore a couple of days early to do their shopping, stuffing their suitcases full of equipment and food. On the day of the check-in, Team California observed the organizational prowess of veteran teams that have navigated the national competition many times, including using color-coded stackable coolers and other time-saving strategies.

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“When you get to these state and national competitions, it takes a little getting used to, it takes a few years to understand what the game plan is,” Nick Brandler said. “We saw teams who have been to this competition multiple times and they all have their tricks, things they do that make travel and competing less complicated. We watched and learned.”

For Padilla, who is a junior and will return next year as team captain, the cumulative experiences of ProStart teams in years past, combined with knowledgeable mentors and passionate classmates, enrich the BUSD culinary program so completely that she feels it is possible for the schools to return to the national competition on an annual basis.

“Going from a school that had never placed at the podium in California culinary competitions, to being state champions and the tenth-best culinary team in the nation is a bit surreal,” Padilla said. “This competition truly embodies the idea that what you put in, you will get out. I hope our win shows that anything is possible with determination, dedication, and honest work.”

In addition to competing on the national stage, the Bonita team received a boat tour around Baltimore Harbor, participated in an education expo and lounged in a room with games and snacks, meeting student chefs from across the country and making new friends. After the awards ceremony, competitors got together for a ProStart prom, where they danced, played cards, and relaxed.

“Congratulations to Bonita High’s ProStart culinary team, who continue to display ambition, innovation and professionalism at the highest levels,” Bonita Unified Superintendent Matt Wien said. “Not only are they learning skills that could lead to lucrative professions, they are expanding their horizons, seeing the country, meeting their peers, and laying the groundwork for success in college and career.”

PHOTOS:

BUSD_PROSTART_NATIONALS1: Bonita High School’s ProStart culinary team wrapped up their most successful year in spectacular fashion, earning a tenth-place finish in their first-ever appearance as Team California during the ProStart National Invitational, held late April in Baltimore. It was Bonita Unified’s second consecutive appearance at the national culinary competition.

BUSD_PROSTART_NATIONALS2: Bonita High School’s ProStart culinary team is ready for competition during the ProStart National Invitational, held late April in Baltimore. Led by BHS ProStart teacher Laurie Brandler (right), the Bonita team earned a spot in the top ten. San Dimas High ProStart teacher Nick Brandler (left) helped to mentor the team, which represented California for the first time.

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